

BLOOD BROTHERS

THE DRAMATIC STORY
OF A **PALESTINIAN**
CHRISTIAN WORKING
FOR PEACE IN **ISRAEL**

ELIAS CHACOUR

WITH **DAVID HAZARD**



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Elias Chacour, Blood Brothers

Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 1984, 2003, 2013 Used by permission.

© 1984, 2003, 2013 by Elias Chacour

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1573-1

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Baker Publishing Group does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my father, who will not be mentioned in the world history books, though he is written in the heart of God as His beloved child: Michael Moussa Chacour from Biram in Galilee, refugee in his own country and one who speaks the language of patience, forgiveness and love.

And to my brothers and sisters, the Jews who died in Dachau; and their brothers and sisters, the Palestinians who died in Tel-azzaatar, Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Contents

Foreword by Lynne Hybels and Gabe Lyons	9
An Urgent Word Before	13
1. News in the Wind	17
2. Treasures of the Heart	29
3. Swept Away	41
4. Singled Out	59
5. The Bread of Orphans	78
6. The Narrowing Way	89
7. The Outcasts	108
8. Seeds of Hope	119
9. Grafted In	136
10. Tough Miracles	155
11. Bridges or Walls?	176
12. “Work, for the Night Is Coming”	196
13. One Link	214
Epilogue: My Questions and My Challenge	225
Afterword by James A. Baker III	229
Abuna Elias Chacour’s Ministry Today	232
Notes	235

Foreword

You can tell a lot from a man's face. The wrinkled lines and darkened skin, the glimmer in his eyes—even his beard tells a story.

We first heard this story on a warm afternoon on the hilltops overlooking the Galilean Sea. With thimble-sized acrylic coffee cups in hand, we leaned forward to listen to one of the wisest men we've ever met share the ongoing story of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. A man who has lived it. Father Elias Chacour.

Born Palestinian and now an Israeli citizen, Father Chacour is a modern-day peacemaker. Leaders in both communities respect him, so there was no better person than he to help us wrestle with what we were encountering in the Holy Land.

Our travels to Israel brought us into direct contact with stories of those who built the modern State of Israel, of their hopes and dreams and struggles. We encountered a people seeking to overcome centuries of persecution by building something new in their historic homeland. And we met those who had recently suffered violence, telling stories of suicide bombings and rockets that fall indiscriminately on civilian populations.

But our travels to this beautiful area of the world revealed additional shocking truths we could never have anticipated. We learned of the dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who live today as second-class citizens in Israel or under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. A shattered economy, land seizures and house demolitions, settlement expansion, Israeli-only roads networking through Palestinian land, and hundreds of military checkpoints—all make daily life difficult and frustrating for Palestinians and fuel the hostility between Arabs and Jews.

What we didn't know was the role we, as American Christians, play in this story. Nor did we foresee how our deepening relationships with both Israelis and Palestinians would wedge us between competing theological positions.

Christians on one side believe that the modern State of Israel constitutes a divinely mandated return of ancient Israel to the Promised Land, and that it is directly connected to the second coming of Christ. This reasonable and thoughtful view often leads sincere Christians to a deep love and active support for the modern State of Israel.

Other Christians believe Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to the Jewish people. This view emphasizes that God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. They too love and honor the Jewish people as children of God, but they believe that end-times prophecies are too difficult to decipher with certainty and should not be used to condemn or justify the actions of modern states, including Israel.

Unfortunately, enthusiasts from both camps tend to caricature the other, making harsh political assumptions. "If you support the State of Israel," says one camp, "you must hate Arabs." The other says, "If you talk about the plight of Palestinians, you must hate Israel." Far from being peacemakers, many Christians contribute to a polarized conversation that actually fuels the conflict.

Father Chacour calls us beyond that. “Don’t choose sides,” he challenged us that day as we stood on the hilltop in Galilee. “Learn what it means to be a common friend to both Arabs and Jews.”

Throughout his long vocation of reconciliation, Father Chacour has found inspiration in the Beatitudes. Two thousand years after Jesus walked the Galilean hills, a diminutive Melkite priest and others like him still wrestle—by deep necessity—with what it means to love our enemies and be peacemakers in a broken world. Entrusted with a seemingly impossible calling, Chacour chooses to follow Jesus every step of the way, and invites us to join him.

That invitation requires listening carefully to the incompatible and mutually exclusive narratives of Israelis and Palestinians, and affirming the compelling nature of both.

It means that we *wholeheartedly* support Israel’s existence as a place where Jews can live in freedom and security. We could not listen to the deep and legitimate fears of Israeli Jews, nor walk slowly through the halls of the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, without being horrified by what the Jews have experienced. We long with them for the day they can live in peace and security. Followers of Jesus ought to be outspoken in their support of the right of Israeli civilians to live without being subjected to rocket fire and suicide attacks.

But we also *wholeheartedly* support equal freedom, security and dignity for Palestinians. We cannot listen to their stories of loss, displacement and ongoing oppression without longing for the day when their children can live with the same access to education, jobs, housing and mobility that we cherish for all children.

Like every compelling story, Father Chacour’s has a simple beginning—and so provides a simple starting point for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of this Middle Eastern conflict.

Blood Brothers, first published twenty-nine years ago, is a timeless story in desperate need of retelling today.

We pray that Father Chacour's story will transform you as it has transformed us.

Lynne Hybels
co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church;
author of *Nice Girls Don't Change the World*

Gabe Lyons
founder of Q Ideas;
author of *The Next Christians*

An Urgent Word Before

Before I had set my hands to the typewriter keys I was aware that this could be “a controversial book.” The reason is that *Blood Brothers* breaks new ground in what has been written about the Middle East turmoil and goes beyond the usual political wrastlings over “who owns the land?” It will disturb certain people and please others, and for the same reason: it probes those ever-murky areas of conscience and heart. Above all, this is a story about people, not politics.

Before I had heard of Elias Chacour (pronounced *shah-koor*), I was not aware that I held certain prejudices regarding Middle East issues. Leafing through the *Sojourners Magazine* one afternoon, I was stopped by an article entitled “Children of Ishmael in the Promised Land”* by Jim Forest, and pored through an arresting interview with Chacour, a Palestinian Christian leader. I was amazed at my mixed response.

What moved me was his soul-felt cry for reconciliation between Palestinians and Jews and his obvious love for both. I

* *Sojourners Magazine*, September 1980.

was stirred by reading about a side of the Arab-Israeli conflict that is little known. Yet something was interfering with my sympathies.

Had I not heard countless news reports about Arab terrorism and the Palestinian Liberation Organization? I had never considered that there were also Palestinian Christians who were living the challenging, nonviolent alternative taught by Jesus Christ in the midst of the world's most bitter conflict. Why had I never heard of Chacour and his people before?

Forest's interview stuck with me a long time, like a nail in my conscience. Finally, in the spring of 1983, it spurred a trip to Galilee where I was to meet Chacour in his small village of Ibillin. Perched on the green hills northeast of Nazareth, overlooking the citrus groves along the Mediterranean, Ibillin has a mixed population of Christians and Moslems. There, my Western mentality toward Palestinians was exposed blatantly, and I felt chagrined.

Somehow I was expecting Chacour, the pastor of Ibillin's Melkite Church, to be naive and unsophisticated. Instead, I was captivated by this man of medium stature, barrel-chested, with a black, prophet-like beard that is streaked by a lightning slash of gray—an intense and intensely warm human being.

I discovered that Chacour is Paris-educated, holds a doctorate, speaks eleven languages including Ugaritic, the ancient mother tongue of both Hebrew and Arabic, and has a degree from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Moreover, his frequent travels carry him to several continents, to churches and synagogues, before queens and prime ministers. With each person he meets—Irish Catholic or Protestant, Indian or Pakistani, Gentile or Jew—he shares the secrets of lasting peace.

Neither was Ibillin what I expected in a Palestinian village. True, the cinder-block houses, cramped against the road, are

poor by Western standards; goats and donkeys wander about, and cats are anything but domesticated; in 1983 the village was just constructing its first high school building. But beneath the surface poverty, the life of the spirit is rich. Dramas and public poetry readings abound, teenagers dance and sing in honor of their mothers on a special day of celebration and the church is alive with young singing voices.

Nevertheless, I was challenged by Chacour's strong statements. Among them, that Palestinians have a God-given right to live in Israel as equals, though many Israelis claim the land is theirs exclusively and by scriptural mandate. And Chacour has a gentle impatience with those who come to Israel to venerate shrines of the past while ignoring human beings, who come to see only "holy stones and holy sand." With a spreading smile, he directed his challenge at me: "Did you come for the shrines—or do you want to learn about the *living* stones?"

Preeminently, he was concerned that I was one more writer from the West who would present a cut-and-dried view of the Middle East. "Can you help me to say that the persecution and stereotyping of Jews is as much an insult to God as the persecution of Palestinians?" he begged. "I wish to disarm my Jewish brother so he can read in my eyes the words 'I love you.' I have beautiful dreams for Palestinian and Jewish children together."

Our encounter sent me on a search for some truth amid the muddle of violence and recriminations, politics and spiritual claims. The fact that I was writing the story of one man's life did not make my work any easier. My strong desire to set Elias Chacour's personal story in perspective made writing painfully slow. And all the while my political opinions and my long-held beliefs about Bible prophecy were stretched further than I imagined possible.

What drove me to completing *Blood Brothers* was the human drama—the compassion and the rare treasure of peace within

Elias Chacour that I wanted to discover for myself. His is a true account that moved me as few before—an account of faith in the midst of indignity, hatred and violence in the furnace that is the Middle East.

In that furnace, Elias's story begins.

David Hazard
March 1984

News in the Wind

Surely my older brother was confused. I could hardly believe what he was telling me. I leaned dangerously far out on a branch, my bare feet braced against the tree trunk, and accidentally knocked a scattering of figs down onto the head of poor Atallah who had just delivered the curious news.

“A celebration?” I shouted from my tilting perch. “Why are we having a celebration? Who told you?”

“I heard Mother say,” he called back, dodging the falling figs, “that something *very big* is happening in the village. And”—he paused, his voice sinking to a conspiratorial hush—“Father is going to buy a lamb.”

A lamb! Then it *must* be a special occasion. But why? It was still a few weeks until the Easter season, I puzzled, sitting upright on the branch. At Easter-time our family celebrated with a rare treat of roasted lamb—and for that matter it was one of the few times during the year that we ate meat at all. We knew—because Father always reminded us—that the lamb represented Jesus, the Lamb of God. And, of course, I realized

that Father was not going to *buy* a lamb. We rarely bought anything. We bartered for items that we could not grow in the earth or make or raise ourselves, the same as everyone else in our village of Biram.

I'm sure Atallah knew that if he waited around, he was risking another barrage of figs and questions. He was already trotting away toward the garden plot beyond our small stone house where I should have been helping Mother and the rest to clear away rocks. It was an endless job even then, in 1947, since no one in our village of Biram owned farm machinery to make work easier. When school had ended an hour before, I had hidden up in this fig tree—my tree, as I called it—to escape the labor. Now, watching Atallah disappear, I wondered what exciting event was rippling the too-regular course of our lives.

I must find Father and ask him myself, I decided.

Instead of dropping down into the deep orchard grass to trail after Atallah, I shinnied higher up the fig tree—up to the very top, where the branches bent at dangerous angles under my weight. This was my special place. Besides being a good lookout post, it bore not one, but *six* different kinds of figs. My father, who was something of a wizard with fruit-bearing trees, had performed a natural magic called grafting and combined the boughs of five other fig trees onto the trunk of a sixth. A thick, curling vine trellised up the trunk and spread through the branches, too, draping the tree with clusters of mouth-puckering grapes. Many afternoons, I monkeyed my way up onto a high branch, sampling the juicy fruit until my stomach cramped. Then I would ease down into Mother's cradling arms and she would comfort me, her littlest boy—her dark-haired, spoiled one.

"Elias," she would coo over me, shaking her head. "You'll never learn, will you?" And I would bury my face in her thick hair, groaning as my four older brothers and my sister rolled their eyes in disgust.

Now, with one arm crooked around the topmost branch, I pushed aside the curled leaves, thrusting my head out into the spring sun, which was slanting toward late afternoon. Perhaps Father was in his orchard. Row after row of fig trees spread for several acres, stretching down the hill away from our house, covering the slope with rustling greenery. The broadening leaves concealed a freshwater spring and a dark, mossy grotto where our goats and cattle sheltered themselves in summer. Beyond our orchards rose the lush majestic highlands of the upper Galilee. They looked purple in the distance—"the most beautiful land in all of Palestine," Father said so often. A dreamy look would mist into his pale blue eyes then, as it did whenever he spoke about his beloved land.

Search as I might, I could not find Father ambling among those trees just now. Most days he worked there with my brothers, teaching them the secrets of husbandry. At seven years old, I was considered too young—and too impish—to learn about the fig trees. With or without me, my father and brothers had busheled up three tons of golden-brown figs in the last harvest.

With a recklessness that would have paled my mother, I swung down from the treetop and flung myself to the ground. Then I was off, running toward the center of the village. Surely someone had seen Father.

I darted through the narrow streets—hardly streets at all, but foot-worn, dirt corridors that threaded the homes of the village together beneath the shade of cedar and silver-green olive trees—dodging a goat and some chickens in my path. Biram seemed like one huge house to me. Our family, the Chacours, had led their flocks to these, the highest hills of Galilee, many hundreds of years ago. My grandparents had always lived here, nearly next door to us. And there were so many aunts, uncles, cousins and distant relatives clustered here, it was as if each stone dwelling was merely another room where another bit of

my family lived. All the homes fit snugly together right up to our own, the last house at the far edge of the village. Biram had grown here, quietly rearing its children, reaping its harvests, dozing beneath the Mediterranean stars for so many generations that all households were as one family.

And today this whole family seemed to be keeping a secret from me. I ran from house to house where small knots of kerchiefed women in long, dark skirts were talking with hushed excitement. Eagerly, I burst in on a group of older women, some of my many “grandmothers.” They stopped clucking at each other only long enough to *shush* me and shoo me out the door again.

My feelings bruised, I trotted toward our church, which was the living heart of Biram. Here the entire village crowded in on Sundays, shoulder to shoulder beneath its embracing stone arches. The parish house, a small stone building huddled next to the church, doubled as a schoolhouse during the week, its ancient foundations quaking from our noisy activities. This year was my first in school, and I loved it. Now, in the church’s moss-carpeted courtyard, a group of men were talking loudly. Father was not among them, so I bounded off toward the open square just beyond.

Normally I hesitated before entering the square. This was the realm of men—especially the village elders—and it held a certain awe for me. Children were tolerated here only because we were plentiful as raindrops and just as unstoppable. However, we knew enough to keep a respectful margin between our foolish games and the clusters of men who came in the evening to hear news that the traveling merchants carried in from far-off villages along with their shiny pots, metal knives, shoes and what-not. Tottering at the edge of the square were the stony, skeletal remains of an ancient synagogue. On this spot, Father had told us, the Roman Legions had built a pagan temple many centuries ago. The Jews later destroyed the temple and raised

on its foundations a place of worship for the one, true God. Now the synagogue stood ruined and ghost-like, too. It was forbidden to play among the fallen pillars, and any child brazen enough to do so suffered swift and severe punishment, for it was considered consecrated ground.

That day I shot out into the sun-bright square—and nearly toppled to a halt. The square, it startled me to see, was not abandoned to the clots of older men who usually nodded there in the afternoon warmth. Men young and old were huddled everywhere, talking about . . . *what?* Surely everyone had heard the news but me!

Impatiently, my dark eyes scanned the groups of men for Father's slender form. It was no use. Nearly all the men wore *kafiyehs*, the white, sheet-like headcoverings that shaded their heads from the Galilean sun and braced them from the wind. At a glance, almost any of them might be Father!

On tiptoe I carefully laced my way between these huddles, peering around elbows in search of that one lean, gentle face. The faces I saw looked pinched and serious. Whatever they were discussing was most urgent. Otherwise they would not be gathered here on a spring afternoon when fields wanted plowing and trees awaited the clean slice of the pruning hook.

Not that I was eavesdropping, of course, but amid the murmur of discussion I picked up the fact that Biram was expecting a special visit. But *who* was coming? Visits by the bishop were quite an event, but regular enough that they did not cause this kind of stir.

My sneaking was not altogether unnoticed, however. Poking my face into one circle of men, I stared up into a pair of black, deep-set eyes belonging to one of the two *mukhtars* of Biram—a chief elder in the village. I tried to duck, but—“What do you want here, Elias?” The *mukhtar's* voice was gravelly with an edge of sternness.

My face reddened. Would I ever learn not to barge into things?

“I . . . uh . . . have you seen my father? I have to find him—it’s important.” I hoped that I sounded convincing, and it was true enough since I was about to die with curiosity.

The sternness of his look eased a bit. “No, Elias, I haven’t seen him. He’s probably—”

“I spoke with him earlier,” another man interrupted. “He went trading today—I don’t know where. Maybe over in the Jewish village.” Then he stepped in front of me, closing the circle again. Thankfully, I was forgotten.

The Jewish village? Perhaps. As I fled from the square, I remembered that Father often went there to barter. Many of these Jewish neighbors came to Biram to trade as well. When they stopped by our house for figs, Father welcomed them with the customary hospitality and a cup of tar-like, bittersweet coffee—the cup of friendship. One man was a perfect marvel to me, roaring into our yard almost weekly in a sleek, black automobile—the first one I had ever seen.

At the far edge of town, I stopped, craning my neck to look far down the road. It was empty. If Father was on his way to the Jewish village, he was long gone.

My eagerness fizzled. And still I could not take my eyes off the road, hoping for some glimpse of him. Beyond the next hill, the road wound southward to Gish, our nearest neighboring village. And further down the valley, not many kilometers, the Mount of Beatitudes rose up from the Sea of Galilee’s northern shore. I could not see the Mount from where I stood and had never seen it for that matter, for even a few kilometers seemed a long journey from our mountain fastness.

Past the Sea of Galilee I knew almost nothing. I could not imagine the unreal world beyond—a world that Father said had just warred against itself. I could not fathom such a thing. Mine was a peaceful world of fig and olive groves, countless cousins,

aunts and uncles. Time passed almost seamlessly from one harvest to another, marked only by births, deaths and holidays. I felt safe and sheltered here, as if the very arms of God embraced our hills like the strong, overarching stones of our church.

Certainly, this was a childlike vision. Only vaguely was I aware of distant disturbances.

There had been trouble in the mid-1930s, before my birth. Father told us there had been opposition to the British who had driven out the Turks and now protected us under a temporary mandate. Strikes and riots had shaken Jerusalem, Haifa and all of Palestine, but these were quickly quelled. It was just one more incident in the long history of armies that traversed or occupied our land. Then things had settled, so it appeared, into a lull. Soon, it was hoped, the British would establish a free Palestinian government, as they had promised. Without a single radio or newspaper in all Biram—even then, in the late 1940s—we had no inkling that a master plan was already afoot, or that powerful forces in Jerusalem, in continental Europe, in Britain and America were sealing the fate of our small village and all Palestinian people.

As I stood dejectedly on the road from Biram, with the sun settling low and red on the hills, my only thoughts were of Father. And Mother . . . *oh no!* I had forgotten about Mother! Surely she would be home from the fields, upset to find that I'd wandered off again. My feet were flying before I'd finished the thought.

At the edge of our orchard, the sweet scent of woodsmoke from Mother's outdoor fire met me, and the steamy sweetness of baking bread. Mother was stooping over her metal oven, which stood on a low grate next to the house. My sister, Wardi, fed sticks to the licking flames, and on the grate, a pot of tangy stuffed grape leaves boiled. My brothers were hauling wood

and water. If only I could slip in quietly among them, Mother might not realize I'd been away . . . But Atallah spotted me first. Nearest to me in age, he was my best ally—and sometimes my dearest opponent.

A tell-all sort of smirk lit his face, and he announced in a clarion voice, “Mother, here’s Elias now.”

Mother looked up at me, the firelight playing about her pleasant, full face. A brightly colored kerchief drew her hair up in a bun. I cringed, expecting a sound scolding. At that moment, however, she seemed unusually distracted, her gentle eyes clouded in thought. “Go and help Musah carry the water,” she murmured, waving me away.

Musah, who was the next oldest after Atallah, was beside me in an instant. He thrust an empty bucket at me. “Get busy,” he ordered with a triumphant grin.

I had to know before I exploded. “Mother, what’s happening in Biram? Is Father buying a lamb? Is it a celebration?”

“Take the bucket,” Musah demanded, his grin fading.

“Mother, tell me. Everyone knows but me and—”

“A celebration? Well, yes. Perhaps. Father wants to tell you himself. I said go help your brother.”

“Take the bucket,” said Musah, thumping me with it.

“*Mother*,” I stomped impatiently. At that moment, a familiar voice called to me through the trees.

“Hello, Elias. I’m glad to see such a happy helper.” From the shadowy green darkness beneath the fig boughs, a lean figure stepped out into the circle of firelight. Behind him, led by a short cord of rope, was a yearling lamb.

Father was home!

When Father returned home at the end of each day, he brought with him a certain, almost mystical calm. His eyes lit up in the flicker of firelight, and a placid smile always turned up the corners of his thick mustache. At his appearance, disputes

between children ceased instantly. For one thing, Father was stern with his discipline. Play was one matter, but rude behavior did not befit the children of Michael Chacour. More than that, I believe we all felt the calm that seemed to lift Father above the squabbles of home or village. Above all, Father was a man of peace.

I raced to catch his hand, absolutely dying to ask a million questions. The weary slump of his shoulders made me think better of it. Father was no longer a young man; in fact, he was almost fifty. His light brown hair and mustache were tinged with silver-gray. For once I held my tongue, and instead, quietly stroked the lamb's dusty-white face.

Turning to Mother, he smiled. "Katoub, has the Lord sent us anything to feed these hungry children?"

Mother knew, without Father's gentle hints, that he, too, was hungry and footsore. "Come, children—quickly," she said, sparking into action. She waved Musah off to the stable on the far side of the house to pen the lamb. Then she mustered the rest of us into a circle around the fire. It was our daily drill: children were organized and quieted, for evenings belonged to Father.

If some important news was in the wind, Father did not seem ruffled by it in the least. No matter that I was about to split in half with curiosity! He accepted a steaming plate of food from Mother, settling with a regal quietness beside the sputtering fire.

Just when I was certain I would explode, Father set aside his plate. "Come here, children. I have something special to tell you," he said, motioning for us to sit by him. It had grown fully dark and chilly, and I pressed in close at his side.

"In Europe," he began, and I noticed a sadness in his eyes, "there was a man called Hitler. A Satan. For a long time he was killing Jewish people. Men and women, grandparents—even

boys and girls like you. He killed them just because they were Jews. For no other reason.”

I was not prepared for such horrifying words. *Someone killing Jews?* The thought chilled me, made my stomach uneasy.

“Now this Hitler is dead,” Father continued. “But our Jewish brothers have been badly hurt and frightened. They can’t go back to their homes in Europe, and they have not been welcomed by the rest of the world. So they are coming here to look for a home.

“In a few days, children,” he said, watching our faces, “Jewish soldiers will be traveling through Biram. They are called *Zionists*. A few will stay in each home, and some will stay right here with us for a few days—maybe a week. Then they will move on. They have machine guns, but they don’t kill. You have no reason to be afraid. We must be especially kind and make them feel at home.”

I glanced at the others. What were they thinking? Wardi’s face seemed a mixture of emotions. On the verge of womanhood, she was graceful and lithe as an olive branch, favoring Father’s slenderness. I could not guess her thoughts. Next to her sat Rudah, my oldest brother. In the leaping firelight, he looked like an artist’s study of Father in his younger days with fair skin, lighter hair, a narrow face and an aquiline nose. At his side was Chacour, who, because of an old custom, had been given the improbable name of Chacour Chacour. Like Rudah, he sported the first faint shadow of a mustache. Though Chacour looked a little uneasy, Rudah’s frown told me he was more deeply troubled. Musah and Atallah both sat stiffly quiet. In a few years, it seemed that they, too, would inherit Father’s lean, wind-carved looks. Only I was dark, with black hair, olive skin and Mother’s rounded face. And I did not know what to make of such news.

Father saw the somber look on all of our faces. With a sudden change of tone, he announced festively, “That’s why I bought

the lamb. We're going to prepare a feast. This year we'll celebrate the Resurrection early—for our Jewish brothers who were threatened with death, and are alive.”

Then Atallah was right. We were celebrating. The strange chill mood was broken.

“And the best news of all,” Father continued, a childlike spark of fun in his eyes, “the best news is that you will get to sleep up on the roof.”

Sleep on the roof! Wonderful! Our house roof was flat, as were most of the roofs in Biram. On summer nights when it was too hot in the loft where we children slept, we were allowed to sleep up there under the stars. On these cold spring nights, we would have to bundle up, but the skies would be brilliantly clear and star-strewn.

Before the excitement bubbled over entirely, Father quieted our cheering. As usual, we would finish our mealtime with family prayers. I crept onto Mother's lap, though I was really too big by then, and listened as Father bowed his head.

“Father in heaven,” he began softly, “help us to show love to our Jewish brothers. Help us to show them peace to quiet their troubled hearts.” As he continued, I imagined his words rising into the night sky like the smoky tendrils of incense that was burned at church. He finished with a soft “amen.”

Mother was strangely quiet and slipped inside where she lit a small fire on the hearth to warm the house. Later the six of us children climbed the ladder to our sleeping loft, where a toastiness had gathered beneath the rafters. As we curled up beneath our blankets, we could hear Mother and Father beneath us, stirring the fire and talking in low voices.

In the coming days, Father would kill and prepare our lamb, and Mother would prepare vegetables and cakes, accepting, at least with surface calmness, the coming of the soldiers.

How could they have understood the new force that was invading our land? It was a force that our Jewish neighbors did not yet fully understand.

And as for me, a way was opening—a way of peace through bitter conflict. And I did not know.

For now, I edged up against Atallah. My breathing slipped into a slow rhythm with his. And I slept for one of the very last nights in my own house.